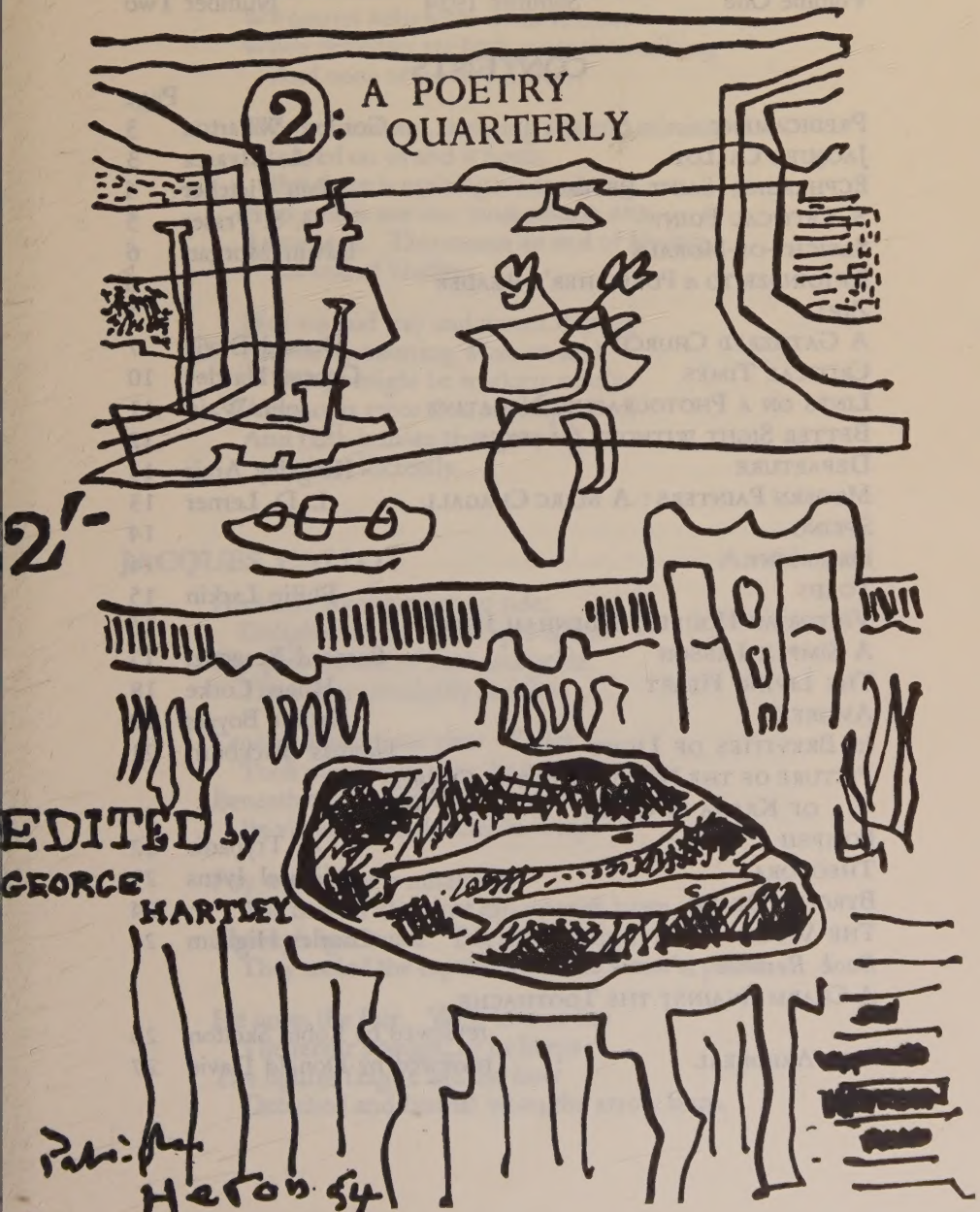
# LISTEN

Summer 1954



# *LISTEN*

EDITED BY GEORGE HARTLEY

*Business Manager: E. Selkirk Johnston*

Volume One Summer 1954 Number Two


## CONTENTS


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Predicament | Gordon Wharton | 3 |
| Jacques Callot | A. Alvarez | 3 |
| Ecphrasis: Saint Peters | Iain Fletcher | 4 |
| A Critical Point | G. S. Fraser | 5 |
| Sleight-of-Morals | Edwin Morgan | 6 |
| Rejoinder to a Publisher's Reader | | 6 |
| Zip! | | 7 |
| A Gathered Church | Donald Davie | 7 |
| Critical Times | George Hartley | 10 |
| Lines on a Photographic Negative | John Wain | 11 |
| Better Sight without Glasses | | 12 |
| Departure | Kingsley Amis | 13 |
| Modern Painters: A Marc Chagall | L. D. Lerner | 13 |
| Spring | | 14 |
| Dry-point | | 14 |
| Toads | Philip Larkin | 15 |
| Victorian Houses, Sydenham Hill | | 16 |
| A Simple Lesson | Bernard Bergonzi | 17 |
| The Living Heart | Hilary Corke | 18 |
| Amores | Arthur Boyars | 20 |
| In Brevities of Light | Thomas Blackburn | 21 |
| Picture of the Nativity in the Church of Krena in Chios | | 22 |
| Pompeii | C. A. Trypanis | 22 |
| Theodora | Michael Ivens | 23 |
| Byron's Death | | 24 |
| The Wolf | Charles Higham | 24 |
| *Book Reviews* | | |
| A Charm Against the Toothache | reviewed by Robin Skelton | 26 |
| Life Arboreal | reviewed by Donald Davie | 27 |

## PREDICAMENT

**Gordon Wharton**

When we said go we meant walking,
And quickly did not mean to run;
  But sometimes never means forever.
We cannot help what we have done
When remedies are little more than talking
  And none of us very clever.

So a predicament, meaning a friend missing
Is foisted on us and it hurts;
  But there is nothing we can bring,
Hurt smiles nor our most solemn arts,
As ransom. This means an end of kissing,
  An end of bluffing.

Had we said stay and meant staying,
And here, meaning what we said,
  Things might be working neatly.
Absence is more than an empty bed,
And faith is more than praying
  Rather discreetly.

## JACQUES CALLOT

**A. Alvarez**

His knife accompanies no side;
  Delightedly the landscapes charm
The pretexts out of hate and pride.
  There is an insularity in calm.

Cruelty depends on view: Callot
  Took pains with pain; he made it creep
Beneath the trees to mock and mow,
  Its violence too delicate to weep.

Pity with sense is misallied;
  The bowels of Christ can nourish harm
Through ignorance. But the statesmen lied:
  They nailed the captive's, not the victor's, palms.

He notes the fact. With love or foe
  The terror's single; so he keeps
The figures fragile and the bow
  Detached and formal when the arrow leaps.

## ECPHRASIS : SAINT PETERS

Iain Fletcher

(after D'Annunzio)

Eyes construct the apsidal shadow
Blinded in the winding air and light,
Where pillars liquefy to shapes—
Angels and smiling friezes.
The curved roof holds
The enormous brooding glance of Heaven.

And lamps with their golden tongues
Glorify those doubled stairs
Where Pius the Sixth knelt down in prayer.
Formal silence broods
Where the last footfall ebbed away.

But when the Roman sun glares through
It splits the finial shadow wide
The dark church sparkles wildly
Drenched with the luminous dews of day.

And drowned in the white gulf of the nave
In majesty of metal glows
That Baldaccino columned high
The Cavalier Bernini wrenched
In spirals from the pagan bronze.

Light drifts on that frigid sepulchre
Where Paul the Third rules his last see;
Roused by the spreading kiss of fire
Pale marble ripens into rose
As once in the Borgia's rich bed, lit
Under Love's conniving eye
Guilia' Farnese's naked dawn.

## A CRITICAL POINT

G. S. Fraser

(For John Heath-Stubbs)

And if it is true as you say that most of this stuff
Is a squiggle on the margin, or the sort of remark
One thinks of but doesn't quite get a chance to develop
In conversation—good for a cocktail-party;
Or again as you also said like a glimpse from a train,
A feeling, ' There, I might make something of it ',

And somebody else described a lot of it
(When they spend their summers in Naples) as
' Picture-postcard poetry '; and much of the rest
Is, to be sure, the callow undergraduate
Playing tough—being Dr. Leavis
On the top-level, but underneath, rather touchingly, being,
Say, Humphrey Bogart,

If all this is so,
Nevertheless, I wouldn't discourage them from writing.
All the Chinese mandarins and the Japanese sensei,
Oh, you might say Catullus in a short poem,
Brushed this sort of squiggle on the margin.
Poetry, in fact, is becoming a social accomplishment
And that may not be very good for poetry
But is good for society on the whole,

And these neat little bitty poems may say more to us,
At the moment, I mean, they may,
Than the most portentous effort at the great ode
Or the solemnest peroration with nobody listening:

Though great poetry is something else, at the moment they may.

## SLEIGHT-OF-MORALS

**Edwin Morgan**

A death in the ditch of libertinism!
The last ditch is the last discipline.
The wounded ganymede glows like Gabriel,
Wolves have fetches that are unferal;
Put your sickness to mystic school.

I saw Traherne on a chestnut branch
Watching the woodsmoke wind and vanish
From the stamped-out fire, the friends had departed.
He spread his hands on the finger-patterned
Chestnut sprays, the candours were partnered.

Eckhart by the dying well
Spoke of divining and festival.
'Dig deep to find the dragon's food
In a shaft like flesh to a source like blood.
—From the centre how far the stars have soared!'

They row in the bay, they linger in forests,
They know of the tempests, they think of the frosts.
Love is water and betrayal is bread,
The prison's walls are as vast as the world,
The sentence is life, let the walls be rolled.

Trundled before the cold juries
Hearts are crimes to heart-abjurers.
May judge and witness sweeten on the apple,
See through the braille of good and evil,
And put their sapience to mystic school.

## REJOINDER TO A PUBLISHER'S READER

**Donald Davie**

A poem will not ripen in the sun;
And who depends upon a sieve of grass
To catch the different with the dodging run,
The quiddity, the queer one, not the class?

You call my poems 'contrived'. They are indeed;
Who ever heard of springes raised from seed?

## ZIP !

**Donald Davie**

I'd have the silence like a heavy chock
That's kicked away as you begin to read;
And sense, responding to the tiny shock,
Roll forward, fire, and smoothly gather speed.

Lines should be hoops that, vibrantly at rest,
Devolve like cables as the switches trip,
Each syllable entailing all the rest,
And rhymes that strike, exploding like a whip.

I'd have the spark that leaps upon the gun
By one short fuse, electrically clear;
And all be done before you've well begun.
(It is reverberations that you hear).

## A GATHERED CHURCH

**Donald Davie**

In memoriam A.E.D. ob. 1938

Deacon, you are to recognize in this
The idlest of my avocations, fruit
Of some late casual studies and my need
(Not dire, nor much acknowledged as a claim
Upon your known munificence) for what
You, as lay-preacher, loved and disavowed,
The mellow tang of eloquence—a food
I have some skill in rendering down from words,
Suppose them choice and well-matured. I heard
Such from your bee-mouth once. A tarnished sun,
Swirling the motes that swarmed along its shaft,
Mixed soot with spices, and with honey, dust;
And memories of that winning unction now
Must countenance this application. For
I see them tumbled in a frowzy beam,
The grains of dust or pollen from our past,
Our common stock in family and church,
Asking articulation. These affairs
Touched you, no doubt, more nearly; you are loath
To see them made a gaud of rhetoric. But, sir,
I will deal plainly with you. They are past,
Past hoping for as you had hoped for them

For sixty years or more the day you died,
And if I seem a fribble in this case,
No matter. For I will be eloquent
And on these matters, having little choice.

You who were once an orator should know
How these things are decided, not by chance
Although to think so is our best recourse;
For we may pledge our faith that they are solved
In part by fervent feeling and in part
By strenuous intellection—so they are,
But by all this under the guise of chance,
Of happy yet exacting accident,
Out of whose bounty suddenly a word
Of no apparent pertinence or force
Will promise unaccountably to draw
The whole lax beam into a burning-glass.
So here I take the husk of my research,
A form of words—the phrase, ' a gathered church ',
A rallying cry of our communions once,
For you perhaps still stirring, but for me
A picturesque locution, nothing more
Except for what it promises, a tang.
Here is the promise of the burning-glass;
Now turn it in the variegated light.

' A gathered church '. That posy, the elect,
Was gathered in, not into, garden-walls;
For God must out of sheer caprice resect
The jugular stalks of those He culls and calls.

Watts thought his church, though scant of privilege,
Walled in its own communion. In its walks
Some may have doubted if so sparse a hedge
Tempered the blast to blooms still on their stalks.

It was the rooted flower could be hurt:
The plucked that lived in living water felt
No more the stress of time, the tug of dirt.
Time lost for good the fragrance Heaven smelt.

When blossoms crowd into the waist of time,
Those cut and chosen for the eternal vase

Rot down to no kind humus, rather climb
And spend their charity upon the stars.

Abundant friction : not a deal of heat.
These are, you know, preliminary rites,
A form of invocation. So the glass
Is moved and dances, waterish, flashes out
Now on the wall, now on the floor . . .
But now your face swims up athwart the light,
The silken, heavy, iron-grey moustache
That reaffirms conciliatory smiles,
Dispensing honey with a Dorset burr;
The hollowed temples of a young man's brow;
The mild and beaming eye; the cheek still apple-hale.
Appealing gestures, pregnantly curtailed,
Conveyed impulsive courtesies, refined
The gross freak of your corpulence. That head
Was bowed beneath reproaches, mostly mute,
When ' Charity begins at home ', we said,
Feeling the pinch of your more public alms,
Wise in our generations. And indeed
You thought so too; your home was somewhere else,
And there you ran most fruitfully to seed.

Now all the churches gathered from the world
Through that most crucial bottleneck of Grace,
That more than hour-glass, being waspish, waist
Where all the flutes of love are gathered in,
The girdle of Eternity, the strait
Too straitened for the sands and sons of Time,
More mean and private than the sticking-place
Of any partial loyalties—all these
In you, dear sir, are justified. Lárgesse,
Suppose it but of rhetoric, endears,
Disseminated quite at large to bless
The waste, superb profusion of the spheres.

## CRITICAL TIMES

**George Hartley**

For Lucky Jim

Pope's silence then is better than his spite,
His ' Essay ' brought the critics to their knees
And now the chastened fools confess delight
(But why should a poet need or praise his fleas)?

Some critics are too conscious of their place,
To stay the moving brothel of their heart
And licence him this vast abstract embrace
' This Iliad brings new music to the art.'

' Tune soft the voice and answer to the strain,'
Wave rusty pens to music in abuse
But then pimps will praise and whores will acclaim
What vainglorious critics all accuse.

Such music then, possessed their lesser ears,
The vulgar was enamoured of the poem :
(He moralised his song in later years)
His was the muse they could not bring to roam

Within the stuffy confines of their page
But copied freely from his melody,
Mocked his agèd image and poetic rage
And vainly compared their gross parody

With his singing of immortal themes,
(Which Johnson said would tune the English tongue)
Coveted the end but abused the means
And brought to disrepute what Pope had sung.

Through constant use they claimed his style their own,
Their hands which shook the bottle spilt the wine
Their girls who turned to bottles are renown,
They never call for corks but speak in mime ;

Of the wine which once filled their shapely form :
Pope now too weak to keep his person clean,
Too tired now to observe what they perform
In mockery of his completed dream.

## LINES ON A PHOTOGRAPHIC NEGATIVE

**John Wain**

Here is a world where light and dark are switched,
The standard pattern contradicted quite ;
A world by the black box's spell bewitched.

This black-faced gentleman, in suit of white,
Stroking a vacuum of staring cat,
Grins broadly in the sunbeams of the night.

' I know my face is black, but what of that? '
He smugly says ; he is too much at ease.
Well knows the careful chemist what he's at,

And he can work, at reasonable fees,
Deftly restoring dusky cat, pale hands,
Placing a pearly sky behind the trees.

But meanwhile, gentleman, the record stands.
And you, we feel, are oversimplifying ;
For you are wandering in magic lands

Where white birds through the ebon skies go flying.
We hope, of course, to rescue you in time—
If not, it will not be for want of trying—

But men and cats both know, truth is sublime,
And not so simple as you seem to think.
We must distinguish cleanliness from grime,

And tell apart the paper and the ink ;
For black and white are very close together,
And one man's vision is another's blink.

You smile upon the flaming midnight weather
As if you felt that things could never alter,
And crows and doves were all of the one feather—

Why, laughing gentleman, what makes you falter?

## BETTER SIGHT WITHOUT GLASSES

Kingsley Ami

The eye sees upside-down ; the brain
Must set up up, down down again.
Then eyes are vigilant in vain.

Since we hold course by instruments
A two-right-angle twist of sense
Is going to make a difference.

Our eyes look well, but on this showing
No wonder we slip up, not knowing
Whether we're coming or we're going.

Tuned in to the inapposite
We reach up to the infinite
And always put our foot in it.

A pair of glasses, polarised
The wrong way up, could be devised
To render nature undisguised,

But then the brain would pack up thought ;
It only knows what it's been taught :
Three-sixty doesn't equal nought.

This shows us where the whole fault lies.
It's no use damning our own eyes
When it's the brain that misapplies

What, twisted round a bit, is true ;
The brain determines what we do
And sees to it we move askew.

So when we cock things up, let's not
Blame what we see, or how, but what
Should run the whole show, and forgot.

## DEPARTURE

**Kingsley Amis**

For one month afterwards the eye stays true,
And sees the other's face held still and free
Of ornament ; then tires of peering down
A narrow vista, and the month runs out.

Too young, this eye will crave the merit of
A faithful sentry frozen at his post
And not a movement seen ; yet ranges over
Far other tracts, its object lost, corrupt.

Nor should I now swell to halloo the names
Of feelings that no one needs to remember,
Nor caper with my posy of wilted avowals
To clutter up your path I should wish clear.

Perhaps it is not too late to crane the eye
And find you, distant and small, but as you are ;
If not, I will retain you honestly blurred,
Not a bland refraction of sweet mirrors.

## MODERN PAINTERS : A MARC CHAGALL

**L. D. Lerner**

The dance is over and the drunken cows
  Climb, slightly embarrassed, off the crumpled moons.
The bilious donkey has slept himself drab and sober,
  The cracked violins begin to play cracked tunes.

Now in this morning of headaches and atonement
  In a corner of the morning a man is praying.
A hush in the dying gasps of crimson fancies
  Enfolds the patterned whispers that he is saying.

Murmurs that interweave, like renunciation
  Constantly crossed with love in the mystic's prayer ;
Black cords of meaning lace the old man's spirit,
  Or stutter their statements across the luminous air.

All this the painter has built into patterned blocks
  Shaped into strange liturgic antitheses ;

Balanced the shadows and space like the meanings of God,
Rested his faith on the sight of a Jew at peace.

(Only a ripple around the shaded silence,
A hair straying out of his beard, or the curve of his cape,
The swaying lines that lie round his lap: these hint at
The urgent Protestant edging to escape.)

## SPRING

**Philip Larkin**

Green-shadowed people sit, or walk in rings,
Their children finger the awakened grass,
Calmly a cloud stands, calmly a bird sings,
And, flashing like a dangled looking-glass,
Sun lights the balls that bounce, the dogs that bark,
The branch-arrested mist of leaf, and me,
Threading my pursed-up way across the park,
An indigestible sterility.

Spring, of all seasons most gratuitous,
Is fold of untaught flower, is race of water,
Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter;

And those she has least use for see her best,
Their paths grown craven and circuitous,
Their visions mountain-clear, their needs immodest.

## DRY-POINT

**Philip Larkin**

Endlessly, time-honoured irritant,
A bubble is restively forming at your tip.
Burst it as fast as we can—
It will grow again, until we begin dying.

Silently it inflates, till we're enclosed
And forced to start the struggle to get out:
Bestial, intent, real.
The wet spark comes, the bright blown walls collapse,

And what sad scapes we cannot turn from then!
What ashen hills! what salted, shrunken lakes!

How leaden the ring looks,
Birmingham magic all discredited,

And how remote that bare and sunscrubbed room,
Intensely far, that padlocked cube of light
We neither define nor prove,
Where you, we dream, obtain no right of entry.

## TOADS

**Philip Larkin**

Why should I let the toad *work*
  Squat on my life?
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork
  And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils
  With its sickening poison—
Just for paying a few bills!
  That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:
  Lecturers, lispers,
Losels, loblolly-men, louts—
  They don't end as paupers.

Lots of folk live up lanes
  With a fire in a bucket;
Eat windfalls and tinned sardines—
  They seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,
  Their unspeakable wives
Skinny as whippets are—yet
  No one actually *starves*.

Ah, were I courageous enough
  To shout *Stuff your pension*!
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
  That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like
  Squats in me too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
  And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
My way to getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.

I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth ;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.

## VICTORIAN HOUSES, SYDENHAM HILL

**Bernard Bergonzi**

(For Iain Fletcher)

". . . Sydenham, a hilly area of once very wealthy, but now mostly deserted Victorian villas, Italianate, Tudor and Jacobean. The phenomenon can best be studied up Sydenham Hill. Aesthetic qualities are not what the visitor would be looking for."
*Nikolaus Pevsner.*

The merchants in the 'sixties saw the view
and came to stay, their prospects being good,
their credit high, and markets vast and new.

Upon the hill the Crystal Palace stood,
leaning its glassy towers toward the sky.
For residence, a charming neighbourhood ;

the air was clear, the district green and high,
and trees and shrubs grew richly round the hill,
refreshing to a City-jaded eye.

So architects possessed of taste and skill
set out to choose a dozen styles from stock
and then combine them, at their clients' will :

Italian, Tudor, Gothic and Baroque :
side by side the various modes were set.
They used them all, with no intent to shock,

but aimed to see the merchants' wishes met.
A self-made man was pleased to stand below
A Gothic arch, an Eastern minaret,

with plaster lions on a portico,
thinking, although he'd paid up to the hilt,
that in return he'd solid worth to show,

and that the stuccoed mansion he had built
would house his children when he passed away,
for there was gingerbread beneath the gilt.

But later owners did not care to stay.
They sold the villas, moving out again,
till, cracked by bombs and crumbling to decay,

these houses are but shells where ghosts have lain.
A plaster lion's mouth is choked with leaves,
a window without glass lets in the rain.

Yearly the houses die, but no-one grieves.

## A SIMPLE LESSON — Bernard Bergonzi

The simple lesson of the flowers and bees
provides at once a model and a clue:
they have a purpose, though they serve to please.

Fair Amaryllis, stumbling through the trees,
and her pursuer, demonstrate anew
that simple lesson of the flowers and bees.

(Although some pollen blows upon the breeze,
the fairer flowers are those the bees undo.
There is a purpose, though they serve to please.)

Those beauties who brought empires to their knees,
Helen and Cleopatra, also knew
that simple lesson of the flowers and bees.

And other fair ones, no less sweet than these,
will fill their rôles, pursued as they pursue.
They have a purpose, though they serve to please.

Conjugal loves, superb adulteries,
whatever act from beauty must ensue,
the simple lesson of the flowers and bees
still has a purpose, though it serves to please.

## THE LIVING HEART

Hilary Corke

What shall we do now all the earth is dead,
Now cohorts of machines in bitter streets
Chaffer for fuel, and the rusty red
Blood of machines beats in late human hearts? . . .

The human heart! Ah, still warm animal
Still in this snow who press a heart to mine,
What might that toy have done before the fall
When living blood could in its arteries chime

And ringing through the hollow vaults of man
Call him to worship all his world of sense ;
And he would come at the voice sovereign
And put his hands into those angels' hands?

And as they led him he with upward eyes,
A world-child trotting home beside tall men,
Exchanged familiar glances with the skies
Or, dropping his wide-open gaze again,

Regarded flowers' trim wheels on stilted trees
And they would sigh towards him as if he
Sucked them with the great wind that his eyes
And nose and mouth drew in continually

From that large world to drive his hungry heart—
When every little sweat-hole in the skin
Pursed out tight lips to feed upon the sweet
ly honey-golden air he floated in!

And then with high-bridged noses and crisped hair
And flat eyes eggshell-blue they turned on him,
They turned with the first foot upon the stair,
They thinly smiled, and he smiled back at them

Whose long and plaided backs moved up the sky
Becoming clouds or rainbows—they were gone,
And he alone (and quite forgetful now
That they had been) would stoop to touch a stone

That curiously like a lizard lay
Between the quivers of the archer grass,
And it would play his game and slide away ;
And now he does not question which it was.

Or else the stone would stoop to pick up him
And he would be the stone and suddenly
A cockle-glass in crystal round each limb
Moulded and formed and set. All history

Melted in that great heat his summer made :
He drew the fields like skirts about his knees
To which the flocks clung still like little beads :
And in his shadows poured the seven seas.

The seas, the seas, and in the orient
The streamers and the shakers moved to dance :
And of the world he made his hat-pin then
To serve his purely human elegance !

But elegance, my love, my squirrel love
Whose browned arms curl about my chest all bare—
Tip out the bus-queues from the sacred grove
And yet you will not find its foot-print there :

The heart is dead, and that will come no more.
And never now the naked feet of life
Will ring with their glass anklets on the stair.
We shall not find another man to love.

Come girl, and shall we through the navel, so
Dive backward to those nymph and shepherd hours?
Or shall we lightly to the mirror go
And breathe ourselves like mist into the glass

(like mist we through the spider's-webs of time
Drift between tears, or like love-letters caught
In grilles of drains when first the cold dawn looms
Hollow with rains to weep all darlings out)?

Sweet, I shall at my own still friendly breast
Knock, and between the wide ribs entering in,

Walk to this famous heart: and know it host
To a great tree of blood wild rocketing

In lush and maniac growth beyond my sight;
And like a giddy boy I'll dash at it
And on its tendrils climb into the light
To take the panorama of our state. . . . . .

And at the top find you there. Or shall we
Hold hands, as now, as angels' once, and go
Like children looking for the Lord, unendingly
Between the engines in this new and bitter snow?

## AMORES

**Arthur Boyars**

Descend from the house to the roadway,
There they stand, the thousand possibles!
Hearts for the high bidder, bodies
Tamed and untamed, now smiling, without speech;
Three steps, she will not be beyond,
Attempted, gifts spin from her eyes.

Three steps and the measuring air
Will crimp its head, acknowledging
New lord of her gesture. Tamed,
Untamed alike shed their face
And turn to remembrance, quietly to one,
Child of six years with us, in that garden.

Are we still here as these brows search us
Reconnaissant? There is that garden face,
(No sure smiling if it were not)—
And here three steps to re-clothe and re-kindle
Coincidence with the figures we were;

Now knowing what of her, except that the sun
Has shadowed the old wish on new screen
And shines to be recognised;
But has lighted it so that completion depends
On a strand of unsmelled, untouched,
On a breast-shape of wool—two lifting worlds.

## IN BREVITIES OF LIGHT

Thomas Blackburn

The wonder is the different situation,
That children simply will not keep the rules,
But write a grammar of their own creation
Quite alien to the logic of the schools.

Thus, if a text is given sour as wormwood,
The rivers dry, the mistress black with rage,
Be sure her pupils paint a honeyed girl
Dispensing milk and kisses from the page.

And she, the heaven-sent, defeats their context ;
Wide-eyed and golden through its scowling laws,
Gentles her sickly nurslings till they swim
Like fishes from the waters of their cause.

The wonder is the unlooked for mutation ;
A dream of water in a globe of sand
Which breeds them feet and starts the guided journey
Of Israel's children to the promised land,
Was never bargained for by their Sahara.
Who thought it up, that mile of cloud-soaked sky
Which teaches them to change their burning station?
No raindrop crossed with silver their blank eye.

Perhaps they but recall a situation,
Before their wicked scripts are pencilled down,
Where they are loved by queens and talk with princes ;
As if in gaps their fever-ridden town
Lives through its skirts of tin and inbreathes whiteness.
The word made flesh is always dreaming children,
Sometimes their broken vision is restored
In brevities of light clean through the moment
Of their foul nursery and its swine-toothed Lord.

## PICTURE OF THE NATIVITY IN THE CHURCH OF KRENA IN CHIOS

C. A. Trypanis

—Tell me, can this unsuspecting infant, staring
At the steep green sky, be ' He, who trampled upon Death '?
Everything round him is so poor and so untrue,
The brown ponies like shabby toys, the shepherds stilted
On their crooks, the Magi wooden kings that dare not bend,
Even the angels, village angels—they could never
Reach the sky again with those flat, clumsy wings.

—Silently, unawares and unbelievably come all
Great things: the inroad of great love, the mist of death.

## POMPEII

C. A. Trypanis

When visiting Pompeii, you must not ask
Why the flashing cinders charred in bed
Those lovers, or those youths, of all who read
Barred Comedies. You should joke and bask

In the sun, and forget all about the rich and poor,
And especially about the virtuous, a pile
Of stone-clasped ashes together with the vile
Brothel-keeper, at whose obscenely painted door

You too will stand. Tourists should look swiftly at a site
And then leave smiling. In some corner, aloof,
The archaeologist will dig on for more proof,
But he will also have to give it up at night.

## THEODORA

Michael Ivens

Her slender body was thrown daily to be robbed
Of its lingering virtue by the city mob,
For any stinking citizen might paw
And take possession of this frightened whore.

Later her comic skill at pantomime
Won laughs and freedom from the Byzantines,
The right to sleep uneasy nights alone
And marriage to the Emperor of Rome.

She was the fairest woman of the age ;
Paul the Silentiary sung her with exquisite praise
And lesser poets were prepared to be
Panegyrists of her royal purity.

And yet all the perfumed waters of Pythia,
The absolutions in the Santa Sophia
Could not remove that old and ugly stain.
Burned deep in soul and body there remained

A memory of cruel and glittering eyes,
The horror of those harsh, remorseless thighs
Falling, crushing, soiling without pity
The fragile emblem of her spirit's chastity.

Nor could Justinian's love remove that fear
Of trampling feet, an opening door, the sickening leer
Of debauchees. Even in the Emperor's embrace
She knew the mindless bodies of the populace.

## BYRON'S DEATH

**Charles Higham**

The battle over, with the hawks circling ;
His twisted foot beating the ground ;
All the passions of an hour
Circling his naked head,
Planets and moons shocked in their spheres,
He dreamed of dying and the newly dead,
Of cities frowning over seas,
Troy dying, and the peninsula
Whence sails like burning leaves fled
Before the heroic wind of Greece,—
Of Procne savaged in a poisonous grove,
Bulls and Gods locked in surmise,
Daphne branched with the wild laurel :
Lights on the sea, lights on the shaken sea.
And died, stopped by a memory.
For he could not forget one night
When in a woman's arms the world
Weightless and dark, the citadel
Of pomp sank in his gaze,
And all the triumphant East burned with a word,
And Rome and Athens trembled as she stirred.

## THE WOLF

**Charles Higham**

Wolf at door or wolf at throat?
Hungry in the harvest, she
Treads as cunning as a stoat,
Crosses then our narrow moat,
Howls at us her mystery.

She is death, perhaps, or war?
The other day a simpler beast
Fell victim to my springe's gnaw
Thick of tooth and thin of claw
Jaws agape for the fatted feast.

I found her in the throttle wood,
Hard by the humpback of the crest.
She lay, past mating time, her mood
Of vague satiety plumped the brood
That lay and dreamed below her breast.

She saw me come, a human thing,
Tall and lean in my leather guise,
With two black falcons on the ring,
Flapping each vast and tattered wing
Fixing her with their jasper eyes.

She saw: and in her swerve, she knew.
She felt death all about her skin.
I watched her as her muscles grew
Larger and larger ; then she slew
One hound before the spear drove in.

Wolf at throat or wolf at door
Can image death, or fear, or lust ;
But she was fiercer with her claw,
Rose more sharply as I tore
Like God, her majesty of dust.

## A CLASSICAL ROMANTIC

*A Charm Against the Toothache,* John Heath-Stubbs. (48 pp. Methuen, 7/6)

With his new collection John Heath-Stubbs joins the select ranks of those whose poetic personalities have individuality and stature. Almost alone of living poets, he has created a poetry of scholarship reminiscent, at times, of the work of some Medieval Latin Lyricists and of, more recently, Cavafy, who also makes use of the Dramatic Monologue of which Heath-Stubbs is so nearly a master. A typical poem of this kind is *Dr. William Turner* which presents us with the recreation of a mind capable of intensifying its instinctive enjoyment of the beauty and strangeness of birds by the remembrance of a note by Aristotle or Pliny, and which concludes with a gentle irony typical of a scholar's quiet amusement.

The accents are at once classically restrained and romantic in mood. The chosen scene or situation is placed against the backcloth of traditional myth, so that we are aware, with *Donna Elvira,* not only of the passion and beauty of the Spanish landscape, but also of her inherited reverence for *'flayed Bartholomew, Or young Sebastian hedgehogged with arrows.'* This constant awareness of the inherited past gives the poems depth and richness, and pervades almost the whole of the book. Only in one or two of the satirical poems is it either lacking or inadequately presented, yet the best of these, *Epitaph,* being cast in a traditional mould, does give an impression, not entirely explained by the fact that the poem is ostensibly autobiographical, of a poetic personality of considerable importance.

This poem is one of those that appeal because of the reader's sense of the mind that made them, rather than because of the impact of the poems themselves. *Hearing the Cuckoo* is another of these. It presents to us, casually and gracefully, a personal view moving in the same way that a verse letter of Alcuin or Walafrid Strabo is moving. This leads one to reflect that the most important thing about the collection is not its incidental beauties (though there are many), but its total effect—its implicit statement of a system of cultured Christian values, and of faith in the importance of learning, of the fusion of informed and instinctive enjoyment.

This is a balanced and civilised attitude, but one which may prevent the poet from producing poems at all notable for dramatic conflict or imaginative fervour. Apollo may outlaw Dionysus. Mr. Heath-Stubbs has, for the most part, avoided this danger. Although Galatea does not descend from her pedestal filled with ecstatic and bacchic vitality as a result of his litanies, she does take on a perhaps more subtly disturbing flush of life, and is not, as is so frequently the case nowadays, imprisoned more securely in her stone. Passionate

anarchy and cold pedantry are alike foreign to this poet whose humanity is that of one, who, epicure of ancient loveliness and elegist of the lost virtues, can yet sing naturally and clearly from the heart, *Benedicite, benedicite, benedicite omnia opera.'*

*Robin Skelton.*

*Life Arboreal,* Ewart Milne. (Peter Russell, The Pound Press, 9/6)

I DON'T know where to start with this. Mr. Ewart Milne is no beginner in poetry; this is his eighth volume since 1938—which is good going. His name is widely known, his reputation established. He has disciples and imitators, especially among the London Irish. Then how is one to say that he seems never to have mastered even the elements of his trade? That he rhymes, makes and breaks rhythms, develops or discards images, apparently quite at random? That every one of his poems seems a first rough draft for something he could not be bothered to write? How can one say all this without seeming to drop at once into the role of the cocky iconoclast, and to the level of wretched gang-warfare among the cliques?

Will a quotation speak for itself? Alas, I know it won't; or else this situation—and of course it's not unprecedented—could never have arisen. But we'll try:

> Without rest, without end the desert encroaches.
> Mother Earth speaks with no uncertain voice;
> And if, here and there, the creeping sands are driven back
> In a painful restoration slow as the growth of young firs,
> Elsewhere man's savage exploitation continues.'

This speaks for itself, or not at all. Either I have no ear, or Mr. Milne has none. The only way to deal adequately with this case would be the way that Geoffrey Grigson took, in 1947, with Dylan Thomas—that is to say, by a heroic restatement of the commonplace that poetry is an art, with all that that implies of a recurrent pattern, from which every deviation must be significant. In some of Mr. Milne's earlier poems, notably ' Galion or the Hound of Leinster ', there was enough of pattern for the reader to be able to ask whether the deviations from it were meaningful and hence legitimate; in poems from this volume, such as ' On a Distant Prospect of Parnell's Statue ', there appears to be no formal organisation at all, so that there are no deviations just because there is no norm.

Mr. Milne, I would say, is seriously trying to be honest and truthful, unaffected and clear; but he is trapped by the long tradition of *artlessness* in poetry as something to be valued for its own sake. His artlessness takes a characteristically Irish or rather Oirish tinge;

he is yet another in the long line of what Patrick Kavanagh has called ' gallivanting ' poets, conscientiously putting straw in their hair and a hole in their breeches, and then tearing away at a stumbling run, so many versions of ' the wild Irishman ' so beloved of the English. Mr. Milne, it is true, makes his own variations on this standard type, and sometimes seems aware of the wishful thinking that lies behind it. Unfortunately, in this volume, where this legendary figure is invoked and then scrutinized, neither invocation nor scrutiny is effected—so far as I can see—in poetic terms, in terms of art.

*Donald Davie.*

BOOKS RECEIVED:

*The Pot Geranium* by Norman Nicholson. (Faber & Faber. 9/6d.)
*The Holy Stone* by Thomas Blackburn. (The Hand and Flower Press. 4/6d.)
*First Communion* by Chris Bjerknes. (Olivant House. $2.)
*Leeds University Poetry 1954.* (2/-.)

*WE RECOMMEND*

**NEO**

A Quarterly of prose and poetry devoted to the furtherance of the literary arts. The best in all types of poetry and prose.

Price in the U.S. 50 cents per copy, $2.00 per year. R. L. Peters, Editor, 454 Boliver Street, Canton, Mass. Price in the U.K. 2/2 post free. Annual subscription 8/- post free. All MSS. and subscriptions from the U.K. to our English agent: The Editor, "LISTEN," 253 Hull Road, HESSLE, East Yorkshire.